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SUBJECT: AFGHAN ELECTION COMMISSION AND WOMEN'S NGOS
DISCUSS INCREASED COOPERATION

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. During a March 16 Embassy-hosted tea, a dozen women's NGO leaders and Independent Election Commission (IEC) and Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) officials strategized how the IEC, together with national and international partners, could encourage women's participation in the electoral process. IEC External Relations Director M. Farid Afghanzai gave a well-received and comprehensive overview of the IEC's recent gender outreach efforts and plans for the future. The women's questions spilt evenly between issues related to election security and transparency and concerns specific to women voters. The Afghan Women's Network (AWN), an NGO representing more than 60 women's advocacy NGOs, proposed to plan and host a follow up meeting.

IEC Efforts

¶2. (SBU) Afghanzai outlined the IEC's plans to involve women in every aspect of election preparations: Two of the seven IEC Commissioners are women, and the IEC has the largest gender unit of any Afghan government institution, he noted. Additionally, the IEC will hire an equal number of men and women as temporary election staffers, including those staffing the IEC's public outreach department and each polling place.

¶3. (SBU) Summarizing the IEC's efforts to promote women's voter registration, Afghanzai said the IEC:

--Held three large conferences in each province where local mullahs assured villagers that women voting was consistent with the tenets of Islam.
--Convinced the Ministry of Hajj to send a letter or representative to every mosque asking the local religious leadership to speak out in favor of women's voter registration.
--Placed billboards encouraging women in cities and rural areas to vote with messages targeted to each population.
--Accommodated women not wishing to be photographed by using fingerprints as identification and printing voter registration cards without photos.

¶4. (SBU) Moving toward the August 20 election, the IEC is organizing a series of meetings with civil society leadership to discuss how civil society can best support free, fair, and transparent elections. As part of this consultation process, the IEC will solicit proposals and award grants to civil society organizations for civic education and election monitoring projects.

Women's Comments

¶5. (SBU) "We need to stand up and raise our sisters' awareness of the importance of voting," said Afghan Women's Council (AWC) Director Fatana Gailani. Gailani appreciated the IEC's efforts, but emphasized that civil society organizations, as representatives of the Afghan people,

should also assume responsibility for a successful election. Her organization is already heavily involved in civic education efforts, targeting women in Nangarhar, Parwan, and Kandahar provinces, as well as in Kabul. AWC staff lead civic education seminars and individual participants in these seminars then accept responsibility for sharing their new information with five other women.

¶6. (SBU) All Afghan Women's Council (AAWC) Director Suraya Perlika asked how the IEC would prevent election fraud. Preventing every instance of fraud would be difficult, Afghanzai admitted. He was confident, however, that the IEC - together with civil society - could ensure that the election would be credible and accepted by the Afghan people. Afghanzai pointed out that civil society could play a crucial role in safeguarding the integrity of the election by providing well-trained, honest election monitors.

Next Step

¶7. (SBU) AWN plans to organize and host a follow-up meeting in late March or early April to develop a specific plan of action to combat the various barriers to women's full participation in the electoral process.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Afghanzai's thorough and well-prepared presentation did a lot to ease the NGO representatives' concerns about the IEC's commitment to women. Even AAWC's Suraya Perlika who

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stridently criticized the organization of the 2004 and 2005 elections, told poloff she was impressed by Afghanzai, and that the IEC was doing a good job this year. Post will continue to foment the relationship between the IEC and NGOs and support civil society engagement in the electoral process.

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